Manufactured Volatility; the Politics of Symbolic Lock-In and the Heel/Face Cycle

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In contemporary liberal-democratic orders, political contestation is often framed as a struggle between radically opposed forces. One a destabilizing threat to the civic order, the other its responsible defender. The surface narrative is that these forces emerge organically from the cultural and economic conditions of the moment. Yet when examined structurally, the apparent antagonism can be reinterpreted as a mutually reinforcing cycle. A form of managed volatility in which the threat is permitted, amplified, and eventually neutralized in ways that preserve the fundamental architecture of power.

To grasp this dynamic, it is necessary to begin from first principles. Political legitimacy in complex societies rests not only on material performance, such as economic growth, security, and rights protection, but also on the maintenance of a coherent symbolic order. This symbolic order is the lattice of shared narratives, categories, and evaluative norms through which events and actions are rendered legible. A political regime can survive significant material disruption so long as its symbolic order retains coherence and can integrate shocks into its narrative grammar. Conversely, the regime's stability is threatened when its symbolic coherence is lost; when events occur that cannot be reconciled within the existing codes without contradiction or absurdity.

The concept of symbolic lock-in identifies the condition in which a symbolic order stabilizes into a self-referential attractor. In such a state, signals are validated not by reference to an external reality, but by their conformity to the system's own categories. This can occur under authoritarian monocultures or under pluralist liberal regimes. The difference lies in the treatment of difference. The former admits only sameness, the latter admits only those differences that can be rendered compatible with its meta-narrative. In either case, the system's openness to genuinely alien signals, those that cannot be translated into its existing grammar without loss, is functionally absent.

Within a pluralist symbolic order such as the United States, stability is maintained by curating difference so that it reinforces, rather than undermines, the core narrative of individual liberty, democratic governance, and market prosperity. In normal conditions, dissenting movements are translated into harmless variants of themselves. Civil rights become a story about fulfilling the Constitution's promise, feminism becomes a story about expanding market participation, environmentalism becomes a story about innovation and sustainable growth. The symbolic order expands to incorporate the alien but only in domesticated form. This keeps the system's coherence density high and its option space narrow; a condition of symbolic lock-in.

However, such regimes are not impervious to shocks. Occasionally, a political force arises whose symbolic mode resists translation, whose appeal is not to inclusion within the consensus but to its rejection. In recent years, Trumpism has functioned in this way, mobilizing symbols, from the "deep state" to media corruption and election illegitimacy, that actively deny the legitimacy of the pluralist meta-narrative. This resistance to translation threatens to destabilize the consensus order's symbolic coherence, producing volatility and expanding the visible range of political possibility.

At this stage, one might expect the dominant order to suppress such forces outright. Yet there is an alternative strategy, and it is here the WWE becomes instructive. In professional wrestling, the heel is the villain, the rule-breaker who generates outrage and dramatic tension. The face is the hero, the embodiment of the sport's rules and values. The heel's function is not to win, but to make the face's eventual victory more meaningful, reaffirming the legitimacy of the system's norms.

Applied to politics, the heel/face dynamic describes a form of managed volatility. The "heel," in this case, Trump and, more broadly, MAGA-style populism, is not simply tolerated but amplified. The constant media coverage, the dramatization of every provocation, the framing of every controversy as existential, serve to heighten public emotional investment. The heel becomes the repository for all that is chaotic, threatening, and norm-breaking. In turn, the "face," the coalition of liberal democrats, institutional conservatives, and moderate reformers, is positioned as the only viable defender of stability, rationality, and order.

From the perspective of symbolic lock-in, this is not a breakdown of the system but a stress test and renewal mechanism. Short-term volatility lowers coherence density, creating public anxiety and a hunger for stability. This allows the pluralist attractor to reassert itself in a more fortified form once the heel is vanquished. The symbolic order is not overthrown but reset, with its core assumptions reaffirmed and its authority to arbitrate reality strengthened. The ownership of capital, the structural design of institutions, and the underlying distribution of cultural and political power remain largely unchanged.

This pattern is not unique to the present. Historical comparison to the Reagan era clarifies the distinction between high-stability lock-in and high-volatility lock-in under stress. In the 1980s, the U.S. political order maintained a stable pluralist attractor. Neoliberalism's meta-narrative of free markets, entrepreneurial individualism, and Cold War patriotism was sufficiently capacious to translate dissent into market-friendly idioms. Civil rights discourse was reframed as opportunity expansion; environmentalism became innovation policy. Volatility was low, and alien symbols that resisted translation were marginalized. The system maintained coherence without the need for dramatic heel/face cycles.

By contrast, the current era exhibits sustained volatility. Social media platforms decentralize symbolic production, making it harder for the consensus order to monopolize the translation process. Alien signals circulate rapidly, often gaining legitimacy precisely through their refusal to conform to institutional codes. This weakens the system's ability to absorb dissent quietly, forcing a shift toward theatrical containment; the elevation of certain disruptive figures into symbolic villains whose defeat can be staged as the restoration of order.

Here the perception of "scriptedness" emerges. Even without a literal conspiracy, structural incentives align. Media conglomerates profit from continuous conflict; political institutions regain legitimacy by managing existential threats; economic elites remain insulated as neither heel nor face challenges the concentration of capital. The result is a cycle that appears chaotic on the surface but is remarkably stable in its outcomes. Each round of crisis and resolution leaves the basic architecture of power intact, while narrowing the range of imaginable alternatives.

The mortality of a figure like Trump adds a narrative horizon to the cycle. Knowing that the heel's time is finite allows the system to plan for a cathartic resolution. Whether through electoral defeat, political downfall, or natural death, the heel's exit will be framed as a collective victory for the forces of reason and stability. The pluralist order will claim to have weathered the storm, using the experience to justify tighter control over discourse and reality arbitration. The conditions that allowed the heel to rise will remain unaltered, ensuring that a new cycle can be initiated when needed.

From a philosophical standpoint, the most important insight is that managed volatility is not an aberration but a maintenance strategy. A symbolic order that cannot integrate alien signals without loss will eventually face a crisis of coherence. Rather than risk uncontrolled breakdown, the system can incorporate the crisis into its own logic by amplifying the threat, staging its defeat, and emerging with renewed legitimacy. This process does not require central coordination; it is sufficient that key actors respond to incentives that converge on the same outcome.

What this reveals about contemporary liberal democracies is sobering. The problem is not simply that dissent is co-opted, as in earlier periods of lock-in, but that dissent is increasingly weaponized as part of the system's own self-stabilization. The citizen's role becomes that of an audience member in a long-running drama, invited to invest emotionally in the struggle while remaining structurally excluded from altering its script. The cycle of heel and face ensures that the appearance of political change persists even as the underlying symbolic architecture and the distribution of power it supports remains constant.

If there is a way out of this cycle, it would require breaking the monopoly of the symbolic order on reality arbitration. Creating spaces where alien signals can be engaged without being translated into the system's meta-narrative or staged as existential threats. This would mean tolerating zones of incommensurability, where difference is not curated into harmlessness nor exaggerated into villainy. Such an approach would weaken the system's ability to use volatility as a renewal mechanism, forcing actual negotiation with alternative symbolic orders. Whether such spaces can survive within the gravitational field of a mature pluralist lock-in remains an open question.

For now, the cycle continues. The current heel will exit the stage in time, the face will claim victory, and the audience will be told that normality has been restored. Yet beneath the cheers, the symbolic order will be the same one that set the stage, wrote the rules, and owned the arena. Until that structure itself is challenged, the drama will go on, endlessly replaying its reassuring arc from crisis to resolution, ensuring that the only change is in the cast.